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ABSTRACT

The problem of grade inflation and explanations for this phenomena are considered. Grade inflation is described as the positive change in grade point average of large numbers of students generally, over an extended period of time. The following array of causes or explanations are discussed: awarding high grades so that a student could go to graduate school rather than be drafted for Vietnam, the culture of narcissism, the philosophy of relativism, institutional innovation and changes in administrative practices, the nature of students, the nature of faculty, the gender and racial composition of colleges, enrollment patterns, and student evaluation of faculty. It is suggested that college faculty are hesitant to be police or "gatekeepers," although their social role is to award certificates and degrees that reflect the levels of competence necessary for certain occupations or social roles. In addition, it is noted that the college or faculty member may benefit from grade inflation in times of declining enrollment and when positive student evaluations of faculty are desired. The issue of grade inflation is further explored in the context of recent versus traditional models of education. Among the trends of the recent model are: the trend for criterion referencing, mastery learning, field-based and experience oriented-courses, and independent study. (SW)

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The Betrayal of the Gatekeepers: Grade Inflation

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"And if a child of theirs should be born with an admixture of bronze or iron, by no manner of means are they to take pity on it, but shall assign the proper value to its nature and thrust it out among the craftsmen or the farmers; and, again, if from these men one should naturally grow who has an admixture of gold or silver, they will honor such ones and lead them up, some to the guardian group, others to the auxiliary, believing that there is an oracle that the city will be destroyed when an iron or bronze man is its guardian."

Plato[1]

"The American educational system is expected to provide opportunity for social and economic mobility by selecting and training the most able and industrious youth for higher-status positions in society. Insofar as the school system does this job efficiently and fairly, it equips youth for career opportunities and it contributes to the success of democracy...the focus of selection...(in the last 50 years) has shifted somewhat from the high school to college."

Robert J. Havighurst and Daniel U. Levine[2]

A just and good society, Plato believed, requires that we recognize differences between individuals and provide the means for them to realize their potentialities for their own and for society's benefit. Both downward and upward social mobility were clearly seen to be necessary to achieve this ideal. In the United States and in much of the rest of the world, the educational system has become the agency for "sorting and selecting," for identifying and developing the special talents of all students and thereby assisting in their discovery of the appropriate social role or occupation most congruent with their natural ability.

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This vital and essential role is in danger of being abandoned by our schools and universities. There is a growing reluctance to discriminate the talented from the untalented ("aren't we all talented in some regard?"). We uncritically want everyone to "get ahead," meaning "to be upwardly mobile" or to be "at the top of the ladder," without realizing that to have a hierarchy or ladder there must be lower rungs as well. We have developed into a society perfectly described by Plato as a "Democracy, which is a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike."3 Everyone is "numero uno," everyone feels "entitled" to everything and society and government is conceived in the metaphor of "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," whereby desires receive instant gratification.

In education the symptom of this disease is grade inflation. We have been abandoning the will to make distinctions, to sort and select. Perhaps because we are unsure of our values and standards, we are moving toward a night where all cats will be black and all children will be above average.

Clearly we need to examine this phenomenon and to reexamine our implied explanation. We need to know the extent of the problem, possible causes, consequences and --- if required, proper remedies.

I. The Problem

Grade-inflation is a term we shall use to describe the positive change in the grade-point average (GPA) of large numbers of students or students generally, over an extended period of time. Some authors define it as an increase in the awarding of higher grades, which implies that we do not have grade inflation if only "D" and "F" grades are diminished, even though the GPA rises. Obviously an increase in GPA for a single person, taken as a unique case, would be properly labelled "improvement" and not "inflation." An isolated period in which GPA's were abnormally high would be labelled an "anomaly." By any definition, we have experienced grade-

inflation and not an improvement nor an anomaly. The term "inflation" is used universally in recent literature (rather than "rising grades" or "higher grades," etc.) and, in the context of current economic inflation, it is clearly used in a pejorative sense.

Arvo Juola has reported on a survey of changes in the GPA of 134 colleges from 1965 to 1973, averaging an increase of .404 points. The 1968-1970 period showed the highest increases. Geographic area, curricular emphasis, size, degrees offered and public/private control showed little variance.[4] A later study by Juola covering the period from 1960 to 1979, including reports from 180 colleges showed a .432 GPA rise from 1960 to 1974 with a cessation in the trend from 1974 onward, but not a regression toward earlier levels.[5]

Suslow also found similar results in his survey of 50 institutions in the 1960-74 period[6]. and researchers at Alma[7], Indiana[8], Indiana-South Bend[9], North Carolina-Asheville[10], and Wichita State University[11] clearly corraborate Juola's findings.

Additionally, Hugh Taylor[12] reports grade inflation in several Canadian colleges and universities as well as at the high school level. Reporting for the American Council on Education, Astin[13] documents a ten-year trend of grade-inflation on the high-school level through 1979, based on reports from 362 institutions. Bills' study of declining ACT scores also indicates serious high school grade inflation.[14]

Other studies focus on the number and percentages of students graduating with straight-A averages or with summa-cum-laude honors. With monotonous regularity, the verdict of "grade-inflation" is handed down. In recent years reports have indicated a levelling-off of the trend, or a "cessation," as if this were a positive achievement. More likely, we have reached the point where any further grade-inflation would completely obliterate any real discriminations in our evaluations of students. Grade-inflation is like the stripper described in Oklahoma! --- "She's gone about as far as she can go!"

II. The Causes

A bewildering array of causes or explanations have been advanced since the phenomenon was identified. These include the Vietnam War, the culture of narcissism, the philosophy of relativism, institutional innovation and changes in administrative practices, the nature of students, the nature of faculty, the gender and racial composition of colleges, enrollment patterns, and finally, student evaluation of facu'ty. We shall be fortunate if we can sort through this mountain of material and get a clearer perception of the way things really are. It will be unlikely that there will be one single or simple explanation.

The Vietnam War is mentioned by relatively few researchers[15] although Lamont rather unequivocally states, "The inflation, a product of the 1960's when no faculty member would willingly "pour napalm on a boy" by denying him the grades to get into graduate school and avoid being drafted for Vietnam, had reached its peak in 1969-70."[16] Research into this kind of explanation is marred by several factors. (1) Significant numbers of instructors who could have been responsible for beginning grade-inflation for this reason are no longer teaching and the task of identifying and interviewing them would be monumental. (2) Even if we identified them there is no assurance they have records or memories of what their attitudes were 15 years ago. (3) Even if we discovered what their attitudes were, we would have no assurance that their behavior would be consistent with their attitudes. (Of course, the fatal mistake of inferring future behavior from stated attitudes mars a great deal of research and policy studies, as so brilliantly explored by Irwin Deutscher in What We Say / What We Do.).[17] The Vietnam War was concurrent with student activism, the Civil Rights movement, women's liberation, economic prosperity, etc. Probably the best we can do is to correlate the facts and to avoid the post hoc, ergo propter hoc fallacy.

Changing student quality was one of three major explanations given by the registrars of 33 Texas colleges and universities in a study by Bromley, Crow and

Gibson. "What is intriguing about these responses," say the authors, "is that 12 of the 21 registrars who mentioned student quality contended that improving student quality is responsible for inflation, while the remaining 9 stated that declining student quality has produced grade inflation."[18] Though generally unconvincing, some plausible arguments have tried to reconcile this paradox. A key to unravelling it is the definition of "quality" and the identification of who has it. On the one hand, "quality" may be identified with high GPA's, and the explanation of college grade inflation may be high school grade inflation. (This in turn needs some kind of explanation - e.g. automatic promotion policies, anti-dropout policies, etc.). On the other hand, "quality" may be identified with Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores or American College Testing (ACT) scores. During the era of grade-inflation GPA's have risen and both SAT and ACT scores have fallen, as have college-level Graduate Record Examinations. During this same period both the absolute and the relative number of college-age students attending college has increased markedly, primarily because of two distinct groups: females and "lower-ability" students. As a result of the growth in the college population, the composition of students in various institutions may have polarized. The elite colleges may have become more selective, and inflated grades out of fairness, since fewer "C" type students were now attending. The non-elite schools may have been drained of their elite students (Federal loan and scholarship programs permitting more geographic mobility in the choice of college to attend), forcing them, if they maintained a normal distribution "curve" for awarding grades, to give "A's" and "B's" to students who would have otherwise received "C's."

The special characteristics of female students, while not decisively explaining grade-inflation, may contribute to improving our grasp of the phenomenon. Female students traditionally have graduated from high school in greater proportions than males, yet males have attended and graduated from college in greater proportions than females. This pattern has virtually ceased to be. Universities that in 1960

had males constituting 60% or more of the study body now report slight majorities of females. Not only do more female high school graduates attend college, but many older women, having raised a family, return to complete their education. The salient fact about this significant demographic change is that women as a group are both "inferior" and "superior" to men with respect to academic quality. Female SAT and ACT scores (in both verbal and mathematic areas) are lower than males; female GPA's in both high school and college are higher.

Nevertheless, the notion that increased attendance of higher performing females may contribute significantly to grade-inflation must be tempered by another important factor: as any group increases its representation in college, the "quality" of the group tends to decrease. This is true of males as well as females, whites as well as non-whites. It is true because historically most students within the top 25% of the population by IQ level normally enter college, and increases in college attendance come from more and more marginal groups.[19]

Another approach to the "female question" with respect to grade-inflation is to examine programs where the gender composition has remained relatively unchanged in the last 20 years. While we are not aware of any research that takes account of ability, socio-economic status (SES), age or other background variables, we have seen that we have sound grounds for believing that, in general, a typical 1980 student population will have lower ability and lower SES members than a 1960 population. Consequently, comparisons of GPA's in colleges of education where the ratio of women to men has remained relatively constant would be useful. These comparisons have tended to show the same pattern or grade-inflation as in other areas where the ratio has altered considerably.20 Hence we may conclude that, in general, neither demographic changes nor quality changes can be demonstrated to be potent factors in explaining grade-inflation. On the contrary, these factors would lead us to expect lower GPA's.

Changing attitudes and practices of instructors, a logical area for research, has not, in fact, been widely studied. The reliability of measures of attitude, as discussed above, may have limited this approach. Generally, however, where it has been possible to take an individual case history approach, individual instructors have tended to award higher grades. But the extent to which this factor contributes to the total phenomenon is problematical. It is probably more likely and significant that as old professors have retired from teaching, younger professors have replaced them and have had more lenient grading practices. Thus grade-inflation could occur despite the constancy of standards of all individual professors.

We need to remember also, that the era of grade inflation overlapped and followed the period of great expansion in higher education. Between 1960 and 1970, 300,000 professors were appointed, doubling the number of college faculty. How these younger professors differed, if at all, from their older colleagues is not clear, but their entrance in such large numbers, and during a period of growth and social change, inevitably made it less probable that they would maintain and be committed to the traditions and standards of the profession.

Again, any apparent change in attitude and practice will usually be explained away in terms of other aspects we are investigating. "Yes," an instructor may admit, "I award higher grades. But this is because I believe the quality of students is higher, not because I have lower standards." or "While generally, I have not lowered my standards, in special cases like Vietnam, non-traditional students, etc. I have made exceptions."

Thus, any direct examination of instructors' attitudes will be frustrating and inconclusive. Nevertheless, despite denials, evasions, and adroit rationalizations, for whatever the reasons, the faculty of our institutions do award the grades and must bear, no matter how extenuating the circumstances, responsibility for grade-inflation and its consequences.

Institutional innovation and changing administrative practices get considerable and deserved attention from researchers. Under the banner of "relevance" and "respect for the individual" and with the alliance of client-centered humanistic psychologies, many important changes were made in the 1960's and 1970's.

Many academically rigorous "core requirements," especially those in foreign languages, mathematics and science, were abandoned, moving an increasing number of universities toward an almost complete "elective system" where students enrolled only in courses that interested them, or courses in which they knew they would do well.[21] (A pendulum swing between an elective emphasis and a requirement emphasis has been noted by Butts[22] as occuring throughout our educational history.)

There was also a trend toward "field-centered" or "experience-oriented" courses and toward non-traditional approaches such as "sensitivity-training" workshops. These courses resemble student-teaching and methods courses long given in colleges of education where grading has been high because the traditional judgmental faculty-student relationship is replaced by an apprenticeship relationship or collegiality, and it is felt that traditional grading practices would interfere with effective interpersonal relationships. As more of these programs were instituted, grade-inflation was reinforced.

Concurrently, so-called criterion-referenced grading practices were introduced. Comparative, competitive, normal-curve distributions, whereby your classmates' high scores resulted in a decline in your ranking, were abandoned by many instructors. To achieve an "A" or a "B" a student would simply have to achieve a predetermined standard. Oftentimes using "contracting" methods, the student would participate in setting the standard.

Closely connected with these practices that were introduced by individual instructors, university-wide administrative practices were introduced, "over which individual instructors (supposedly) had little control."[23] These procedural changes included, (1) later withdrawal dates, permitting students to drop courses in which

they are in danger of receiving low grades, (2) expunging (from transcripts) first-attempt grades for courses later repeated (more) successfully, and (3) pass/fail (and credit/no credit) grading. In each case the option is viewed as camouflaging students' "real" performance and allowing students additional strategies by which to raise their grade-point averages artifically."[24]

Job security factors constitute a final category for investigation, including budgetary pressures on the institution, enrollment decline, "credit-hour production" and student evaluation of faculty teaching performance.

Underlying these factors is the distinction between professional merit and institutional worth.[25] Tenure, promotion and salary decisions must, necessarily, take both into consideration. The world's leading authority on an obscure foreign language may be an excellent teacher and be meritorious by all standards, but he may have few enrollees in his classes, and the mission of the university may not assign his discipline a high priority. His worth may be zero.

Now as financial pressures mount because of inflation, or state legislature cuts in state institutions, or enrollment declines in private institutions, instructors who are marginal both with respect to merit and worth are increasingly jeopardized. They must earn their keep in terms of worth, and our trust in terms of merit.

Worth is translated into "credit-hour production," and a mad competition ensues between institutions and within institutions. State Colleges vie with State Universities for a larger share of the declining number of state students and a larger share of the state revenues. Departments vie with departments and professors with professors to attract students and justify their continued existence. The lure, of course, could be winning football teams, co-ed dorms, part-time job opportunities or more "meaningful" curricula. But for the pre-med or pre-law student, and for many others, the lure is high grades.

Geisinger has clearly demonstrated that students do withdraw from courses when grades tend to be low to protect their grade point averages.[26] More frequently,

of course, the student will tend to avoid enrolling with professors who have reputations as low graders and/or the professor who has seen his "credit-hour production" slip because of withdrawals and declining enrollments will have the tendency to inflate his grades to win back the student who had been lured elsewhere.

Favorable student evaluations is a job-security factor more connected with merit, though indirectly connected with worth. This is one of the most frequently cited factors in the literature concerning grade-inflation.[27] One recent study went so far as to claim that "...student ratings of faculty diminish the quality of higher education, they poison faculty/student relationships by encouraging professors to use students rather than educate them. They inhibit academic free expression, encourage faculty to target instruction at the lowest common denominator, and cause faculty to withhold or distort their professional judgment."[28] Other studies use equally strong language: "student evaluation...is felt to increase faculty vulnerability to student expectations for high grades...,"[29] "faculty intimidation results from student ratings..."[30] (emphasis added).

Although Grace French-Lazovik believes "that favorable student evaluations cannot be bought by giving easy grades"[31], Aleamoni's survey shows that research does not generally support Lazovik.[32] Kennedy[33] concluded that "...grades were significantly correlated with their ratings of faculty performance," and Snyder and Clair's (1976)[34] interesting experimental research found that "the evidence, then supports a notion that a teacher can get a "good" rating simply by assigning "good grades." The author's recent study shows that reducing grade-anxiety dramatically raises positive student evaluations.[35]. Irrespective of the research, however, is the fact that faculty overwhelmingly believe that more lenient grading practices will contribute to more positive evaluations by students, while 70% of students in a recent study "indicated that the grade they thought they would get influenced the level at which they rated their professor."[36] Quid pro quo.

In summary, there is little or no evidence for believing that we have grade inflation because of changes in students. High school graduates seem to have less ability rather than more. They do not achieve or learn more in college. An increase in females enrolled and similar demographic factors, as well as shifts in major fields and, courses elected bear no important relation to grade inflation.

Changes in administration practices such as "pass/fail" and later withdrawal dates as well as innovations such as "experience-oriented" courses and criterion referencing seem to contribute somewhat to the problem.

It is widely believed that the social and political upheavals of the period, including student activism, the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War did contribute significantly to grade inflation, but these "causes" are difficult to quantify and document. Similarly, the great influx of new college professors from 1960 to 1970 is also widely intuited as a significant factor. Finally, job security factors seem to play a major role, with the relationship between the awarding of higher grades and favorable student evaluation being increasingly well-documented.

III. Discussion

The bewildering array of explanations that we have examined perhaps creates some confusion because there are several levels of explanation that are not made explicit, and all are presented in a jumble. For example, if college instructors inflate grades (Level I) because students are supposedly superior because of their higher high school GPA (Level II), the real explanation should focus on Level II, and we may then discover that there is even a Level III explanation that is the most cogent. In our investigation above, and in the literature generally, there is a lack of clarity about levels of explanation. We briefly touched on the issue in discussing attitudes of instructors, but we need additional analysis.

What must be stated loudly and clearly is that we have grade inflation because students are receiving more high grades and fewer low grades from their instructors.

Or, to restate the obvious more forcefully, we have grade-inflation because instructors, acting as free moral agents, are awarding fewer low grades and more high grades. Simply and clearly, this is the incontestible, unimpeachable, transparently obvious, a priori explanation (Level I) for grade-inflation.

Level II explanations will generally be found to return to Level I quickly and directly. Criterion-referenced grading has not been imposed on instructors by deans, college presidents or Boards of Regents; it has been freely implemented by instructors. Similarly, it is the free individual instructor who elects to make his course "experience-oriented" or "field-centered." It is the free individual instructor who choses to keep his students from Vietnam, or choses to encourage disadvantaged students, by awarding higher grades. It is the instructor who awards high grades to encourage positive student evaluations. To appeal to circumstances or "the system" or the "temper of the times" is equivalent to Flip Wilson's famous "The Devil made me do it!" and to deny one's own moral autonomy.

With respect to the abandonment of requirements, and the innovations in grading regulations (more liberal withdrawal ("W") and incomplete ("I") practices; pass/fail or credit/no credit options, etc.) which have contributed significantly to grade-inflation, we need to be reminded that these changes have not been imposed from without by deans, presidents, God, or the Devil, but that these are faculty decisions. It may be true that they are not always made by a majority of a faculty directly. Frequently a representative body, typically a faculty Senate, initiates the change. But given the near-universal adoption of such changes across the broad spectrum of American colleges and universities, it is a safe bet that a large majority of American professors have approved the changes.

Thus, if we bewail the phenomenon of grade-inflation, we will be forced to agree with the immortal aphorism of Pogo: "We have met the enemy and we is it." And we do seem to bewail the phenomenon. As we noted earlier, the term has come to carry a pejorative connotation and, consequently, the dozens of recent

studies are indicative of a wide-spread concern. Many of these studies, of course, affect the standard scientific pose of neutrality and are simply empirical studies. But behind the empirical study is the choice to undertake it, and ultimately there is a moral position. Where neutrality is (refreshingly) abandoned, there is little if any defense for grade-inflation by the authors of the articles and books. Lamont urges that "inflated grades (should be) made a punishable offense,"[37] and Potter calls it "the scourge of the seventies."[38] Cahn recommends that the practice should not be continued[39] and Juola reports that over 70% of the responding institutions in his study of 180 colleges are taking specific action to curb grade-inflation, but few have changed their grading systems.[40] Hoyt's interesting study compares faculty and students on the issue, and finds that 62% of the Kansas State University faculty viewed inflation as a "bad thing" while only 2% perceived it as a "good thing." On the other hand, "students were more apt to view grade inflation positively."[41]

IV. The Real Questions

We come now to the real questions.

Why are we concerned, uneasy, or perhaps guilty about grade inflation? What is wrong with it after all? And if it is wrong, why has it gone so far; why have we done it?

We will examine the first two questions first, and we will do so accepting the assumption that the grading system has a reason for being. Then we will examine the final question and examine the assumptions and consequences of the grading system itself.

The answer to our first questions, "why are we so concerned --- what is wrong with grade inflation after all" has been given in our opening quotes of Plato and Havighurst. As college professors who have accepted appointments in our system of higher education, we have entered into an implicit "social contract" to preserve and enhance the essential nature of that system. Part of the essential nature of

that system is its function of sorting and selecting, of identifying talent and developing it.

To a considerable extent the sorting and selecting function is new to higher education. In Jefferson's day it was the function of the elementary school to separate "the gems from the rubbish." The intermediate college-preparatory or grammar school further sorted students so that the universities had confidence that all of its students were highly qualified. In such a situation further grading was superfluous. Faculty could concentrate on education --- developing the talents that had been identified --- in a relatively non-judgmental, non-adversary climate of collegiality. With the expansion of educational opportunities in the 19th century the halcyon days of higher education were numbered. The approaching universality of the common school and the explosive growth in secondary education after the Kalamazoo Decision in 1874 moved the sorting and selecting function to the high school in the first part of this century. Whereas less than 10% of the population finished high school in 1900, we will probably reach the point at the end of this century where less than 10% of the population will not finish high school! Hence, as Havighurst noted, "The focus of selection has shifted somewhat from the high school to college."42

Dealing with young adults, college instructors are understandably loathe to be judgmental parents, policemen or "gatekeepers," but that is the way our educational system has evolved. The sorting role has been dumped onto our laps. As scholars we are temperamentally unfit for the job, but as guardians or responsible citizens we should know that the job must be done. Our Arcadian dream-like past of collegiality in a community of scholars has come into a rasping conflict with our newer role of judge and jury in an adversary relationship. We are understandably uncomfortable and distressed by the dissonance, and seek release.

But it is our job to discover as best we can --- and we are certainly imperfect --- those most fit for particular occupations or social roles. The health and well-being of our society depend upon our success. We have accepted the social role of

certifying competence, so necessary in a huge and complex world. Perhaps it would be ideal to allow anyone to do anything, as Illich seems to be saying --- to fill our cavities, perform surgery, prepare our taxes, teach our children, defend us in court, design our houses, etc. --- and for those who do well to be recommended to friends and achieve a following. But our social reality requires (perhaps not quite so much as we have believed) that we award certificates and degrees which reflect the levels of competence necessary to do the job. Grade-inflation has blurred important distinctions, has made everyone appear to be above average and has led many citizens to suspect that incompetents have been turned loose in the marketplace.

Furthermore, the sorting process has a personal dimension as well as a social one. One major function of the schools according to Friedenberg[43] and others is for the student to discover who he is and who he is not so that his identity can be more clearly defined. Cahn believes grade-inflation gives students a distorted view of themselves.[44]

Grade-inflation is wrong, then, for at least two reasons: (a) it subverts some of the major, worthwhile or necessary purposes of education in our society. It has, in other words, undesirable consequences. (b) in abdicating our role without prior sufficient discussion, reason and agreement, we have put ourselves in the unethical position of breaking the implicit "social contract" inherent in our profession.

But even beyond this, grade-inflation is especially wrong for some of the particular reasons we have examined where institutional or personal gain was our motivation rather than a supposed student gain. When we are concerned with declining enrollments or with positive students evaluations of our performance and we, in effect, bribe students with high grades, we are using students for our purposes. We are not treating students as ends-in-themselves. And apart from our manipulation of the student, we are behaving unethically toward other institutions or other faculty members by engaging in practices that are not universalizable. If everyone tried to counter declining enrollments by "stealing" students from other institutions, the

practice would not, eventually, work. If everyone tried to improve his relative ranking by "buying" good evaluations, there would be no improvement in anyone's relative ranking. And yet these are among the leading practices that have led to grade-inflation.

If it is any consolation to our troubled consciences over these immoralities, we can point out that we educators are not alone in elevating temporary and personal rewards over the "common good."

Over and over again in American society we have devised systems that give individuals freedom to exercise options without regard to the "common good" although their behavior does indeed affect the common good. We have instituted a health-care system in which each individual is encouraged to claim excessive services because he does not have to pay the piper; the "system" (read, "other people") pays his bills. "Everyone perceives the system to be, in effect, free."[45] American management practices are aimed at showing immediate short-range profits (which result in bonuses paid to top managers) rather than at desirable capital improvements which could have long-term benefits. Unlike the Japanese manager whose loyalty is to the company, the American manager, in effect, "rips off" the stockholders (although they see temporary gains) and the public for his private good. Corporations and economies that have eschewed liquidity have prospered, even in these trying times.[46]

V. The Final Question --- A Paradigm Shift?

A portion of the condemnation of grade inflation rests on the assumption that grading is an essential function of our educational system. This tradition runs from Plato through Havighurst to the present moment. Is this a useful assumption?

A puzzle is the widespread participation of institutions and instructors in the subversion of our tradition. Have a few bad apple schools and professors driven the system to become rotten? Is Gresham's Law at work?

Some insight into these questions might be had by looking at those examples of grade inflation where, ostensibly, the venal motivation of buying enrollments in our colleges or classrooms is not apparent. Many sincere and devoted instructors have contributed to grade-inflation because they instituted what appeared to be professionally sound practices. They have introduced "criterion-referencing" and "mastery-learning" which puts no limits on the number of "A" grades awarded if prescribed levels of achievement are reached. They have encouraged "field-based" and "experience oriented" courses where traditional paper and pencil testing and grading seem inappropriate. They have allowed students to undertake "independent study," pursuing unique programs that offer no grounds for comparative grading.

Underlying these practices is a tacit rejection of one model or "paradigm" and the substitution of a new one. It will be useful to describe the older model which can be called Traditional Humanism and to construct or discover the emerging model which we will call Romantic Behaviorism. We will then attempt to compare and evaluate the two in terms of the consequences for the future of education in our society.

In the traditional model, the instructor was, to use Plato's terminology, a "guardian." He was older and wiser, a father figure for our culture who judged whether the young learner had measured up to the prescribed standard. He determined whether abilities were or were not commensurate with social (and economic) roles. However, the genius of our Western educational tradition, beginning with Plato, was that it not only transmitted the practical techniques for social, economic and political competence, but it also developed appreciation for values and ideals. Both the "real" and the "ideal" were included in the determination of ability or competence for the important social roles. At the risk of being misinterpreted, we can say that education was both secular and religious. And indeed, through the centuries universities in particular have straddled Church and State, occasionally

infuriating each in turn, yet convincing each of the imperative need for universities to stand apart from both.

Plato's plan of study was "to draw the soul from becoming to being"; it was a "turning of a soul* around from a day that is like night to the true day; it is that ascent to what is..."47 We may extract a metaphor for the central purpose of higher education from Plato's inclusion of astronomy in his curriculum: to practically navigate here on earth, we must grasp the laws of the Heavenly bodies. Practice and theory are both required. Even more generally, Plato intuited that to comprehend any This required the Other, that thought processes are dialectical. To comprehend Athens we need The Republic; Rome needs Jerusalem; The City of Man, The City of God. And within the curriculum, the naturalistic quadrivium needs to be balanced by the humanistic trivium. The ideal is to be balanced, well rounded. Though we overspecialize in practice, we still pay homage to the idea of the Renaissance Man.

In recent times this vision of duality necessary for the truly educated man has been expressed in various ways.

Commager and Reisman48 have argued that schools should act "countercyclically" --- if society was traditional and conservative, schools should promote change; if there was excessive social change the schools should conserve the past. John Herman Randall speaks of the need to have "bifocal vision." Postman and Weingartner49 see the role of the school to be "subversive" of the prevailing values. This noble vision of education seeks to free the learner from a single perspective, a given dogma, an official doctrine. Whatever is liberal in education liberates the human spirit. Thus, the university not only trains for practical professional competence, but it also recognizes that true competence transcends narrow practicality, and educates broadly as well. Insofar as the university is able to maintain this

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*Cornford and Shorey translate the phrase "a conversion of the soul..."

mission --- and it must be vigilant in warding off attacks by its friends and foes alike --- it is the prime, nay the essential, agent of freedom and humanity as we know them.

To fulfill its mission requires, as we have implied earlier, independence from both Church and State. It requires academic freedom in all ways. Freedom to be ornery, to be the Devil's Disciple, to present the "other." Freedom to determine curriculum so that minds can grow.

Now this independence has not always been granted freely. In earlier times sectarian religious sponsors were fearful of heretic universities; today state legislators are often reluctant to keep their hands off our affairs. We must constantly prove our worth and earn our independence. It is given grudgingly and is a fragile thing.

Traditional Humanism can be summarized as follows:

1. Education serves society by selecting and educating individuals to perform essential social roles.
2. Insofar as the individual possesses the special talents needed for the social role, education develops his "humanity" or uniqueness as well.
3. Preparation or education should not be limited to the present requirements of the social role in an imperfect society, but should relate as well to the improvement (or betterment) of the role and of society. Hence education has a normative dimension; it needs a balance between the real and the ideal and between specialization and general studies.
4. Since the special talents needed for the diversity of the social roles that exist in society may be found in all races, social classes and gender, both social and individual development requires that there be equality of opportunity, leading to upward, downward and lateral mobility.
5. Since individuals differ and are more and less suited to particular social roles a ranking or hierarchy is needed for proper selectivity to take place.

Academic terminology translates this into degrees, grades and graduation, implying "more or less," "higher and lower," "better and worse." (Selection can be a continuous process or it can be done all at once or it can be concentrated at a given level of education.)

6. To maintain its normative dimension and to avoid narrowly training people to fill slots in an existing society, education (and especially higher education) requires a certain amount of freedom, autonomy, or self-governance no matter who provides its financial support.

This model of Traditional Humanism has been derived mainly from Plato's Republic (points 1 - 4 rather explicity; points 5 - 6 implicitly), yet most of the standard philosophies of education would not quarrel excessively with it. Perennialism would emphasize and elaborate on point 3, stressing the importance of the "ideal," while Essentialism would stress the "real" and would not insist on the inclusion of point 6. Progressivism would fuss with the separation, in point 3, of the real and the ideal, the practical and theoretical, and would reformulate the meaning of balance while retaining its basic humanistic value. Progressivism would also object to the apparent inflexibility of human talents and social roles in the formulation given, and would point to the dynamic nature of both. Reconstructionism, a derivative of Progressivism, would tend to share its views but not be as critical with respect to point 3; it would argue for a clearly defined ideal, a utopian plan of action toward which we should strive. Existentialists and Analysts, however, would not so much object to the formulation as to be indifferent toward it. Existentialists, in their intense focus on the individual, tend to ignore the social function of education, or view it hostilely as an incursion on the authenticity of the self. Analysts, as meta-theorists, would neither reject nor accept the formulation so much as try to clarify certain terms or find ambiguity in others.

So it seems that from among the standard range of thinking about education there is general agreement about the need to have some agency or agencies respon-

sible for the sorting and selecting process. The question comes down, not to whether we have "gatekeepers," but "who shall be the gatekeepers?"

The public schools have been increasingly relieved of the responsibility. Their arguments are cogent. "Either by compulsory education laws or social pressure against dropping out," they say, "you have made us retain almost all students through high school, so that now a high school diploma is virtually universal and meaningless. Since society no longer regards a diploma as a mark of excellence, we leave it to the colleges to do the real job of sorting and selecting. We have different problems and opportunities. On the one hand, we have the custodial function of keeping teenagers off the streets and engaged in some kind of productive activity. On the other hand, with the competitive pressures of sorting and selecting greatly relaxed, we can alter the adversary relationship of teacher and student which has prevailed. We can innovate, we can relax, we can educate in new ways and we can be good fellows and inflate grades to keep everyone happy because they don't matter that much."

And so gradually and imperceptibly, without warning and without preparation, the college instructor assumed the role of the high school teacher. He was trained as a scholar, an academician, and although he had been somewhat involved in the sorting and selection process, this was a minor aspect of his job. College students were supposed to be capable and college teaching was supposed to be a joyful experience. Eager and inquiring students. The quest for knowledge. The community of scholars. But increasingly, this was corrupted by grade hungry students who knew the score better than the professor. Here's where the action was, here's where grades really count. Students began looking at other students as competitors, at professors as adversaries, at the educational process as a game in which their GPA was the final score. "This is not the way it was supposed to be," says the professor ruefully, as he sees himself trapped in a maze of "credit-hour production," declining enrollments, student evaluations and poorer students who have higher expectations.

How easy it is to give them all that they want, and maybe get some of what he wants! And the gatekeeping function of education? What does he know about that? He is a professor of accounting, or French, or music theory or kinesiology or biology or educational psychology. "Let the admissions office or the graduate schools take care of the sorting and selection process! Let the sociologist of education worry about it! I've got problems of my own!" he ways.

Concurrent with the shift in the focus of selection from high school to college that Havighurst noted, and particularly in the last twenty years when it has been most pronounced, there have been proposed a succession of innovations aimed at reforming or transforming the schools. These have included racial desegregation and integration, compensatory education for the disadvantaged, deschooling society, sensitivity training, affective and "humanistic" education, accountability, behavioral objectives, learning and teaching "styles," special education, performance-based programs, minimum competency testing, career education, criterion-referencing, computer-assisted learning, moral education, etc.

Many of these innovations, such as racial desegration and integration, clearly relate to Traditional Humanism. But an inordinate number do not seem related to this paradigm at all, or to its perennialist, essentialist, progressive or reconstructive variants. These innovations derive from existentialism and analysis and now seem to be coalescing into some kind of inchoate new philosophy. We will label it Romantic Behaviorism, (Joyce[50] calls a similar confluence behavioral humanism) and claim that the "mastery learning" of Benjamin Bloom[51] is the best example of this new paradigm. Bloom believes the following:

1. "What any person in the world can learn, almost all persons can learn." (p. 7)
2. Consequently, "many nations have moved from the view of schools as performing primarily a selection and classification function to the view

that the major function of the schools is to help students develop educationally." (p. 2)

3. "Equality of learning outcomes can be a goal of education rather than equality of opportunity." (p. 215)
4. "If equality of learning is achievable...then...(there) would no longer be a basis for the sorting of persons into more favored and less favored categories." (p. 209)

These points are in stark contrast to points 1, 2, 4 and 5 of Traditional Humanism. (Bloom does not — perhaps cannot — address himself to the question of a normative dimension and the notion of liberal education; his behavioristic concept of man does not suggest the need. Nor does the notion of academic freedom play a role, as it is tied to the aims of liberal education).

Bloom has co-opted some of the rhetoric of the (existential) Romantic critics of the 1960's with their political liberalism, non-competitive individualism, criterion referencing and attention to the affective domain. On the other hand, his argument weaves together such diverse strands as behaviorism, learning styles, compensatory education and competency based learning.

The message of Romantic Behaviorism is that we do not need gatekeepers to select and sort, and that, consequently, we don't really need grades. And, if we have them, they should be basically "formative" or diagnostic, rather than "summative" or evaluative so that grade-inflation is of no major concern.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to critique Romantic Behaviorism, but several questions about it need answering. Has success with mastery learning in a few low-level task situations on the elementary level been extrapolated into an ambitious theory of education? Does the "corrective instruction" that is continuously required imply prohibitively small classes and high costs? Is the extra "time on task" — perhaps the core of the theory -- really consistent with the notion of equality of outcomes when in a given time period learner "A" will indeed master

task "X" but learner "B" will master task "X" and task "Y"...? The theory seems to be reducible to this admittedly crude but realistically trite formulation: No matter how stupid the person seems to be, if he is given enough time and enough quality instruction, he will learn. But our work in the "real world" is rarely free of time constraints, and speed of learning seems to be a valid factor in the very definition of competency. Bloom and his followers should read Andrew Marvell's To His Coy Mistress:

> Had we but world enough, and time,
> This coyness, lady, were no crime.
> ...
> But at my back I always hear
> Time's winged chariot hurrying near.

On the other hand, the extra time and costs required for mastery learning may indeed be negligible — especially as computer-assisted learning takes hold. Some remarkable successes are being reported and the extreme optimism of Romantic Behaviorism may be validated. But it will be some time before we are certain that this is an adequate educational and social theory, and that it is as applicable to higher education as it is to elementary education.

Despite these considerable misgivings, many college instructors have abandoned their gatekeeping function in the name of mastery learning, and have joined the ranks of the grade-inflators. We need to examine the consequences of this, the ultimate result and danger of grade inflation.

The basic premises should be stated as clearly and as forcefully as possible: society rests upon the division of labor; if everyone were capable of providing for all of his needs we would have not a society, but a collection of autonomous individuals. In this division of labor, each task or role has its unique requirements with respect to the kind of talent needed and the level of attainment achieved. The more efficiently and fairly society fills these positions, the more successful it is.

Some kind of process, agency or device is essential to sort and select individuals for these positions.

It follows, then, that if a given agency relinquishes its role as "sorter" or gatekeeper, society must, and will, quickly replace it with another. The question is not whether we should have grading or sorting or examinations and the ranking of individuals (not in terms of their human worth, of course, but in terms of their suitability for a specified role or position), but when it should be done, and by whom. If it is done as part of the instructional process and by the professional teacher, we refer to it as an internal examination; if it is done apart from the instructional process by strangers, it is an external examination.

It comes down to this. If "society" loses confidence in the reliability of the schools to sort and select, external examinations must be imposed.

As society lost confidence in elementary education to sort and select (or when it decided the process should occur at a later time), it (a) delegated the task to the secondary schools and it (b) began to utilize I.Q. tests and achievement tests such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). The older elite college preparatory schools --- the Latin Grammar Schools and Academies --- were replaced with the more egalitarian comprehensive public high schools, however, and public confidence in the ability of the secondary school to sort and select began to wane. As the prestige of the high school diploma disappeared, ACT and SAT examinations developed and the colleges were entrusted with the sorting task. Additionally, "exit" examinations to ensure minimum competency are being imposed by state legislatures, resuscitating the practice that New York state long had of a state-wide "Regents Examination." Finally industrial testing of job applicants also attempted to determine workers' competencies.

Having received "the buck," passed to it from the secondary schools, we are now at the point where the colleges are looking for a receiver. Some instructors,

of course, aren't even looking for a receiver. They simply want to get rid of the ball (for all the reasons catalogued in this paper).

The consequences are absolutely predictable.

Undergraduate degrees will be regarded as lightly as high school diplomas are today. To bolster their sagging value, some colleges will institute "exit examinations." Graduate schools will increasingly require and rely upon the Graduate Record Exam as medical and law schools now lean so heavily on the MSAT and the LSAT. Business and industry will increasingly disregard college degrees in their placement and promotion practices and rely on their own in-house testing.

Perhaps for a short time college instructors will be relieved. No more grade hungry competitive students! No more agonizing judgments over awarding "C's" and "D's"! Just good old plain teaching.

But then students will begin to take those courses that enable them to do well on the external exams, instead of those in which they get good grades, and instructors will increasingly teach those "useful" or "relevant" (to passing the exams) areas and ignore what is untested or untestable. And it may well turn out that what is testable and tested on the external exams is altogether different from what professors had been doing in higher education throughout our glorious history. The tested and testable may be highly specialized and narrowly utilitarian subject matter devoid of a normative dimension, a far cry from the spiritually liberating curriculum designed to enlarge our perspective and free us from official doctrines. The balance between the real and the ideal will be destroyed; education will become vocational training. Curriculum decisions will come, ultimately, from Princeton, N.J., the state legislators and business managers. The autonomy of college professors will erode and crumble; academic freedom will be a quaint relic. The betrayers will be betrayed.

FOOTNOTES

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